Crime Trends and Implications of 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Policing

Stephen Rickman
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I. Overview

Since 1960, the FBI has published an annual Uniform Crime Report (UCR), which contains extensive statistics on both violent and property crimes. Law enforcement agencies use two crime categories—violent crimes and property crimes—as guides for recording offenses reported to police. According to the UCR, violent crimes include murder, rape, assault (aggravated or felonious), and robbery. Property crimes include burglary, larceny, theft, arson, and motor vehicle theft.

This report provides a summary of reported crime trends and includes meaningful data and a long-range analysis of the directions in which crime rates have been moving for the past 50 years. Though measuring crime can be an inexact science, capturing directional trends may be more meaningful to enhancing law enforcement practitioners’ understanding of current crime patterns. The regional and national trends for the past 50 years will provide the reader with a historical context to better understand current crime patterns. The report also presents more recent trends for the United States’ major cities, paying particular attention to murder, as error in reporting and recording this type of crime is minimal and because murder has the greatest social consequence. Each presentation of data is followed by a discussion titled “Inside the Numbers,” which attempts to identify contributing factors for the trends.

Finally, the report examines the implications of the reported trends for current and future policing practices. While crime trends and the factors driving those trends are changing, the manner in which American agencies police remains somewhat static. Instead, effective policing in the 21st century requires a new policing paradigm that reflects changing crime trends, the existing cost-constrained environment, and growing expectations from the public for a wider range of policing services.
Uniform Crime Reporting

The FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program is the primary means for measuring crime in the United States. The UCR system was conceived in 1929 by the International Association of Chiefs of Police to meet a need for reliable, uniform crime statistics. The UCRs collect data on Part I offenses, which include the violent crimes of murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; as well as the property crimes of burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson. The UCRs also provide data on numbers of arrests and arrestee characteristics.

Currently, the UCRs collect information from roughly 17,000 law enforcement agencies (about 95 percent of all policing agencies) that voluntarily report crime data to the FBI. Although a small percentage of state and local law enforcement agencies do not participate in the UCR program, these omissions can include as many as 18 million people, or 6 percent of the U.S. population.

In this analysis and presentation of crime trends, rates are used rather than raw totals, as rates take into account population changes and more accurately reflect the overall impact of crime.¹

UCR Validity Concerns

The UCR Program is limited by a number of factors. First, it omits data from a small percentage of police agencies, it lacks information on crimes not reported to police, and it lacks certain categories of crime. For example, victims may not always report crime for a number of reasons, such as fearing reprisal, believing that reporting does not matter, or considering the crime a personal issue. This failure to report leads to an underestimation of crime levels by the UCR. Another factor influencing UCR statistics is the hierarchy rule: For a single crime incident during which multiple offenses are committed, only the most serious offense is reported. Moreover, variations in police departments’ reporting accuracy can weaken the data. Unfortunately, for many different reasons, police officers do not always record crimes that are reported to them. Finally, the UCR

leaves out large and important categories of crime that are increasingly impacting quality of life. Examples include white collar and internet crimes involving fraud, and drug law violations.

In spite of these and other weaknesses, the UCR Program has proven to be a very reliable measure of crime over time. Since the inception of the UCRs, the data have remained stable, providing important information about crime trends and providing a substantial body of research to support the reliability of this measure.

**Victimization Survey**

In 1967, the National Opinion Research Center interviewed 10,000 members of households to determine if they or another member of their household had been a victim of crime during the preceding year. The results of the interviews suggested that, for the same crimes covered, victimization was twice the rate of that reported in the UCRs.

In response, in 1972, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics initiated the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). This survey collects data on seven crimes of interest: aggravated assault, robbery, rape, sexual assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and theft. Bureau personnel used the NCVS to interview approximately 134,000 people representing about 77,000 households. This measurement methodology captures crimes not reported to police and crimes reported but not recorded. It also provides more detailed data about crime victims.

However, this method has limitations, including memory errors of respondents, false reporting, and sampling error. The NCVS also is unable to disaggregate data by city or state, making it less valuable than the UCRs. Research findings generally indicate that NCVS data correlates fairly well with UCR data, especially for burglary and robbery, although less so for aggravated assault.²

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II. Fifty Years of Crime Data

Reported Crime in the United States

Property and violent crime rates have had similar trends since 1960, with some minor variation (see Figure 1). Property crime rates peaked in 1980, while violent crime rates peaked in the early 1990s. Since then, crime rates have steadily declined, reaching the lowest levels since the early 1970s. Between 2005 and 2010, there were sharp declines in all major crime categories. During this period, violent crime rates fell by 15.8 percent, and property crime rates fell by 12.1 percent.

Figure 1. Violent and Property Crime Rates in the United States, 1960–2010

UCR data for 2011 indicate a continuation in this downward trend. Violent crime decreased by 4 percent in comparison with 2010 rates, while property crime decreased by 1 percent.\(^3\)

Of note, citizens report crimes to police at varying rates, depending on the type of crime. Many crimes go unreported, as substantiated by victim surveys. However, because of the severity of murders, this type of crime is almost always reported, and historical data are substantial. Figure 2 illustrates the trends in murder and non-negligent manslaughter rates. As shown, murders nearly doubled between 1960 and 1981. However, in the early 1990s, the rate began to decline steadily. By 2010, it had returned to 1960s’ levels, a 50-year low.

The declining trend in murder continued in 2011, although the decline slowed to 2 percent from 2010 to 2011.\(^4\)

Figure 2. Murder Rates in the United States, 1960–2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Murder and Non-negligent Manslaughter Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph showing murder rates from 1960 to 2010" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1960–2010. Rates are per 100,000 residents.

**Inside the Numbers**

The national reduction in crime is best illustrated by the dramatic declines in murder, the most easily detectable and confirmable type

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\(^3\) Annual Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011.

\(^4\) Ibid.
of crime. In 1991, there were 24,703 murders\(^5\) in the United States, as compared with 14,748 in 2010.\(^6\) The nation is experiencing nearly 10,000 fewer murders annually, which is profound and was never predicted or expected.

Despite debate among criminologists, no clear consensus has been reached on the reasons for this 20-year declining trend in reported crime. In an article published in 2011 titled “Crime and the Great Recession,” James Q. Wilson offers the following possible reasons:\(^7\)

* Higher incarceration rates, including longer prison terms;
* Target hardening, such as enhanced security systems;
* More effective policing strategies that focus on preventing crimes;
* Environmental factors that lead to reduced blood lead levels; and
* Changes in illicit drug-use patterns, including substantial reductions in cocaine use.\(^8\)

In his article, Wilson cited a recent study by William Spelman and Steven Levitt (researchers at the University of Texas and the University of Chicago, respectively) that suggests that the increased incarceration rates beginning in the 1990s accounted for about 25 percent of the reduction. However,

\(^5\) Uniform Crime Reports, Violent Crime/Murder Table 1, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1991.

\(^6\) Uniform Crime Reports, Violent Crime/Murder Table 1, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010.

\(^7\) James Q. Wilson was a leading political scientist known best for his research on the behavior of police officers and lawbreakers. His research laid the groundwork for crime-reduction efforts in several cities. See http://www.city-journal.org/2011/21_3_crime-decline.html for the full article.

Wilson, noting comparable crime rate reductions in Canada without an increase in incarceration rates, suggests that this was only a partial explanation.

Target hardening, such as enhanced security systems, can certainly be considered part of the explanation for the dramatic declines. For example, motor vehicle theft rates in the last 20 years have declined by 64 percent. Advances in locking systems, alarms, and GPS tracking may have contributed to these reductions.

Wilson also believed that changing policing strategies contributed to lower crime rates. During the last 20 years, a shift to a community-policing paradigm has increased the visibility of police officers in communities and placed a greater emphasis on enhancing communications and building trust with residents. In addition, federal initiatives, such as the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the U.S. Department of Justice’s Weed and Seed Program, have fostered partnerships between policing agencies and community stakeholders, breaking down barriers and enhancing collaboration between the police and the residents they serve. The recruiting and hiring of minority police personnel for urban police departments has also helped to alter perceptions of police, who were often thought of as an “occupying army” in minority inner-city communities. Equally as important may have been the research-driven, place-based approach to policing that calls for police officers to be concentrated in “hot spots” or high crime areas to add to enforcement efforts and prevent crime. Studies by Criminologists Lawrence Sherman and David Weisburd, who examined high crime areas in Minneapolis, demonstrated the positive effect on crime reduction of place-based enforcement tactics. More recently, in a National Institute of Justice Report titled “Mapping Crime: Understanding Hot Spots,” John Eck summarized studies in this area and concluded that:

- Identifying hot spots requires multiple techniques;

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Current mapping technologies have significantly improved the ability of crime analysts and researchers to understand crime patterns and victimization; and

Crime hot spot maps can most effectively guide police action when production of the maps is guided by crime theories (place, victim, street, or neighborhood).

In addition, Wilson noted that reductions in crime may be related to the decreasing blood lead levels in U.S. children. The levels fell by 80 percent from 1975 to 1991; however, there is minimal research to back this theory.

Finally, Wilson cited changes in illicit drug-use patterns (especially the substantial shift from crack cocaine to marijuana use in the early 1990s) as an important contributing factor to declining crime rates. The use of highly addictive crack cocaine appears to fall hand-in-hand with the high rates in criminal activity in the 1980s and early 1990s. Addicted individuals often turned to crime to support their habits, and the high demand for this drug produced highly profitable drug markets that were violently fought for and protected. In the 1990s, marijuana became the drug of choice, and its distribution through a more diffuse drug market and its lack of addictive qualities began to fuel less criminal activity. Wilson cites a study conducted by Bruce D. Johnson, Andrew Golub, and Eloise Dunlap of 13,000 people arrested in Manhattan between 1987 and 1997 that supports this connection of illicit drug use and crime patterns. This study shows clear differences in cocaine use depending on the year of an arrestee’s birth. A majority of arrestees born between 1948 and 1969 were heavy crack cocaine users who contributed to escalated crime levels in the 1980s and early 1990s. Arrestees born after 1969, who were young adults during the decline of reported crimes in the 1990s, reported the use of marijuana instead of crack cocaine.

UCRs for 2011 suggest the downward trend may be continuing, with a reported 4-percent decline in violent crime and a 2-percent decline in murders (preliminary numbers for the first six months of 2012 indicate the downward trend may be flattening out). Victimization data for 2011 suggest a changing trend with violent crime victimization increasing 17 percent after a decline since 2008. In the past, these 2 measures often shared directionality, but the data for 2011 appear to be an aberration. Moving forward, the small declines
in UCR numbers in 2011 and the end of actual declines in the first six months of 2012—coupled with the significant increase in reported violent crime victimizations—may be indicative of future changing trends.

Finally, incarceration rates are expected to decline, which could adversely impact downward crime trends. Continuous economic distress, reductions in public safety expenditures, and increases in drug use—especially of cocaine, opiates, or other addictive drugs—could also reverse this declining trend. Other factors, such as target hardening, more effective preventive policing, and changes in drug-use patterns, may continue to contribute to the current decrease in reported crime.

**Reported Crime by U.S. Region**

All four regions of the United States—Midwest, Northeast, South, and West, as defined by UCR—have experienced similar trends in violent and property crime rates over the past 50 years (see Figures 3 and 4). Over the past decade, the South has consistently experienced the highest violent and property crime rates in the nation—a notoriety held by the West until 1995. For property crimes from 1960 to 1985, the rates in the West were substantially higher than in the rest of the country. More recently, the outlier has been the Northeast, with lower property crime rates than other regions. This trend has held for the past 15 years (Figures 3 and 4).

In 2010 and 2011, the South, followed by the West, Midwest, and Northeast, had the highest violent and property crime rates.¹¹

¹¹ Annual Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011.
Figure 3. Violent Crime Rates, 1960-2010

Source: Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1960–2010. Rates are per 100,000 residents.

Figure 4. Regional Property Crime Rates, 1960–2010

Source: Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1960–2010. Rates are per 100,000 residents.
**Inside the Numbers**

Although there are some differences in regional crime rates, the real story may be the similarities in trends over time, especially in the last 20 years. All four regions have consistently experienced steady downward trends. In spite of regional differences in demographics, cultural traditions, and even enforcement practices, the consistency of these trends supports more macro, or national-level, explanations for declining crime numbers. For example, particular enforcement strategies or tactics, or changes in state or local sentencing practices, may have had a lesser sustained impact on crime numbers than other factors with broader influence, such as demographic changes.

For the past 15 years, the southern region of the United States had the highest violent and property crime rates. The South consistently experienced higher murder rates. In 2010, the murder rate for the southern region was 5.6, compared with 4.2 for the Northeast, 4.4 for the Midwest, and 4.2 for the West. Outlier states in the South in 2009 and 2010 were Louisiana (11.8, 11.2) and Mississippi (6.6, 7.0). A similar pattern to homicides existed for assaults, but rates for robbery and rape were more in line with the other regions.

In 2000, Graham Ousey—in his book article titled “Explaining Regional and Urban Variation in Crime: A Review of Research”—explained that southern areas historically have experienced “higher primary and conflict murder rates and higher assault rates.”  

Ousey further states:

“…the preponderance of the regional homicide studies suggests that economic deprivation is an important predictor of variation in homicide rates. However, the evidence is inconsistent and many studies are plagued by conceptual shortcomings that make it difficult to estimate the independent effects of region and poverty on homicide rates.”

He also discussed the often-cited “Southern culture of violence theory,” which conjectures that violence is rooted in southern culture.

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as a result of both the institution of slavery and notions of honor and manhood that promoted the resolution of disputes through violent means. Ousey discussed some research findings that support the culture of violence theory, but notes their inconclusiveness because of the methodological challenges in measuring “southern culture.” Because of ongoing migration patterns, Ousey believed that these regional differences will dissipate over time.

Change in Violent Crime Rates by State

Figures 5 and 6 show 5-year and 2-year violent crime trends for each of the 50 states and for the District of Columbia. The dark green color marks the states with the greatest reduction in crime, and the orange-to-red scale marks the states with increases in crime. Southern states have generally experienced the biggest declines in violent crime rates in both the 5-year and the 2-year time spans. Some notable decreases in violent crime occurred between 2005 and 2010 in North Carolina (22.5 percent), Florida (23.5 percent), and Virginia (24.5 percent).

Although violent crime rates are down nationally, 11 states saw their rates increase between 2005 and 2010. The most notable of these were West Virginia (14.8 percent), New Hampshire (23.7 percent), South Dakota (50 percent), and North Dakota (102.7 percent).
Figure 5. Percent Change in Violent Crime Rates by State, 2005–2010

Source: Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005–2010

Percent Change in Violent Crime Rates - 2005 to 2010

-25% to -21%  -5% to -2%  11% to 15%
-20% to -16%  -1% to 1%  16% to 20%
-15% to -11%  2% to 5%  21% to 103%
-10% to -6%   6% to 10%

Source: Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005–2010
Inside the Numbers

Four of the seven states that experienced increases in violent crime from 2008 to 2010 saw gains of less than 1 percent. The violent crime rate in Arkansas increased by 2.6 percent, while the rates in North Dakota and West Virginia increased by 5.8 and 7 percent, respectively.

Four states—Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and West Virginia—had increases of more than 5 percent. These states have much in common. They tend to be more rural and less densely populated when compared with the rest of the United States. In fact, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota are ranked 46, 47, and 48 in terms of state population density. They also tend to have lower crime rates than the rest of the country.

Violent Crime in American Cities

Estimates from the 2011 UCR provide data on recent crime trends in America’s largest cities. This section reports the violent crime rates for cities with 500,000 or more residents, including 10-, 5-, and 2-year trends for each city. In addition, the violent crime estimates from the
2011 UCR help to identify recent trends, especially compared with 2010 numbers.

Table 1 provides the 2010 violent crime rates of cities with 500,000 or more residents in rank order. It also provides the 2010 homicide rate and violent crime trends over the past decade. The violent crime trends show that the most violent cities in the United States have been making strides. For instance, Detroit; Baltimore; Washington, DC; Philadelphia; and Nashville-Davidson have all seen reductions in violent crime of close to 20 percent or greater in the past decade. Although Memphis and Milwaukee saw overall gains between 2000 and 2010, there have been major reductions in violent crimes per capita since 2008 in both cities. In fact, almost every major city on record has experienced reductions in violent crime since 2008. The one exception is New York, where the crime rate declined significantly over the decade, but the rate has since plateaued. The greatest declines since 2008 have been in Charlotte-Mecklenburg (34.2 percent), Jacksonville (33.3 percent), Dallas (21.7 percent), Phoenix (21.5 percent), and Tucson (21.4 percent).

Since 2008, nearly all major U.S. cities have reported declines in violent crime. The most notable reductions have been in Charlotte, NC; Jacksonville, FL; and Dallas, TX. For 10-year trends, Los Angeles, CA, and Portland, OR, have had the largest reductions in violent crime.

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13 Chicago does not comply with UCR rape-reporting standards and, therefore, has an incalculable violent crime rate by UCR standards.

14 Indianapolis has not yet provided 2010 data for the FBI to use in their projections.

15 Louisville did not provide violent crime data in 2000 and, therefore, does not have a calculable 10-year trend.
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<td>Detroit</td>
<td>1887.4</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>-18.8%</td>
<td>-20.0%</td>
<td>-4.9%</td>
<td>-23.8%</td>
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<td>Memphis</td>
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<td>-19.9%</td>
<td>-2.1%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
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<td>-6.6%</td>
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<td>-4.9%</td>
<td>-15.6%</td>
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<td>585.8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>-6.2%</td>
<td>-14.3%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
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<td>New York</td>
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<td>6.4</td>
<td>-38.5%</td>
<td>-13.6%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>-0.9%</td>
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<td>Fort Worth</td>
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<td>8.4</td>
<td>-19.4%</td>
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<td>-1.7%</td>
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<td>-29.8%</td>
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<td>Austin</td>
<td>475.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<td>-26.9%</td>
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</tr>
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<td>San Jose</td>
<td>331.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>-39.8%</td>
<td>-13.6%</td>
<td>-14.0%</td>
<td>-0.8%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>268.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>-5.2%</td>
<td>-5.6%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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</tbody>
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Both violent and non-violent crime rates have been in decline in much of the United States over the past decade. The most recent trend data show that every major city in the country, with one exception,\footnote{The way that Chicago’s Police Department collects data on reported rapes does not conform to FBI standards. It is, therefore, excluded from violent crime rape-comparisons.} saw violent crime rates drop between 2008 and 2010. Initial findings from the 2011 UCR show that this trend is continuing in most major cities. However, several cities show an increase in their.

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\footnote{The way that Chicago’s Police Department collects data on reported rapes does not conform to FBI standards. It is, therefore, excluded from violent crime rape-comparisons.}

\footnote{At the time of publication, 2010 crime rates from Indianapolis were not available.}

\footnote{The violent crime rate in New York increased by 0.2 percent between 2008 and 2010.}
homicide rates for the first half of 2011, when compared with the same period in 2010.

Detroit, Memphis, Baltimore, the District of Columbia, and Philadelphia recorded the highest violent crime rates in America in 2010 among cities with 500,000 or more residents. However, these cities have made remarkable strides over the past decade (as shown in table 1). For instance, since 2005, Detroit has seen a 20-percent reduction in its violent crime rate. Similarly, the violent crime rate in Memphis dropped by about 17 percent between 2005 and 2010, and by nearly 20 percent from 2008.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg, with a drop of 34.2 percent, led the way for violent crime reduction from 2008 to 2010. Following that metropolitan area was Jacksonville (33.3 percent), Dallas (21.7 percent), Phoenix (21.5 percent), and Tucson (21.4 percent). Violent crime rates in Charlotte-Mecklenburg have remained well above 1,000 per 100,000 residents for several of the past 25 years. It was not until 2007 that the rate finally dipped below the 1,000 mark, registering at 986.4, and this was a relatively modest decline from the previous year. Two of the greatest annual declines over the past 25 years occurred in 2009 and 2010. The violent crime rate in 2009 dropped approximately 22 percent from the previous year. In 2010, the violent crime rate continued to drop another 15 percent from the banner year of 2009.

**Inside the Numbers**

Although jurisdictions are ranked by their violent crime rates, these rankings do not simply reflect police performance. Numerous factors—including population density and degree of urbanization, variations in composition of population, and socio-economic conditions—influence the incidence and reporting of crime. However, such factors may not be as pertinent as the directional trends for each jurisdiction when examining crime rates.

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19 The greatest annual decline in the violent crime rate in Charlotte-Mecklenburg occurred in 1994. However, that was the same year Charlotte City and Mecklenburg County merged into one police department.
Criminal justice researchers have, over the years, explained differences in urban crime rates in numerous ways. For example, some believe that inequalities in the American economic system lead to concentrations of poverty in urban areas. They note that during the period of escalating crime in urban areas, there was a corresponding shift to post-industrial economies that exacerbated exiting inequalities and led to an exodus of the middle class from many of these neighborhoods. The result was high concentrations of poor people in segregated and isolated neighborhoods. These settings contributed to social disorganization, a welfare–based economy, and a proliferation of female heads of household.  

There are many theories as to how these social environmental factors contribute to crime. Several of the more prominent theories include the following:

**Cultural deviance theory** postulates the development of an independent belief and value system within low income groups found in urban settings that conflicts with social norms from the predominant culture. This theory suggests that criminal behavior is more of an expression with conformity to the sub-cultural values and traditions.

**Rational choice theory** suggests criminal behavior is a result of a rational calculation of risks and rewards. For example, the decision to burglarize may be based on the likelihood of getting caught and potential penalties, weighed against the value of the goods stolen in the burglary.

**Self-control theory** postulates that all people will engage in self-indulgent behavior, including criminal acts, until individual’s experience “socialization,” or an inculcation of societal values.

**Strain theory** suggests that crime is a function between peoples’ goals and the means they use to attain them. Accordingly, when some low-
income residents are unable to meet their goals, they often are tempted to pursue illegal means if necessary.\textsuperscript{21}

The steady decline in crime is not adequately explained by any of these theories or models. In fact, the conditions believed to lead to the increases in crime have not changed substantially in the last 10 years. There are still high concentrations of urban poor in many cities; unemployment remains high; and while punishments for crime may have become more severe, the likelihood of being caught and arrested has not substantially changed. Those cities reporting the higher violent crime rates today have higher concentrations of urban poor (Detroit, Memphis, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, DC); but even in these cities, the downward trend in crime over the last 10 years has been substantial. These outcomes may support the view that changing drug markets (and especially the decline of crack cocaine and use of opiate drugs) may be an important contributing factor to decreases in crime rates.

It also is possible that enhanced police performance includes the use of more evidence-based and community-driven policing strategies. For example, strategies such as police-community partnerships; placed-based approaches; and, more recently, the application of Smart Policing principles that emphasize analytics, research, and technology are contributing to declines in urban crime. Another factor contributing to reduced crime levels in major cities could simply be weariness of involvement in the justice system, especially in the poor Black urban communities. Young adults impacted by the incarceration of fathers and brothers may be taking additional measures to avoid getting caught up in the criminal justice system.

III. Implications

Continuing Downward Trend?

It is important to once again note the limitations of UCR data and the fact that the numbers do not reflect true levels of crime, as much goes unreported. UCRs do not capture the less serious crimes (Part 2 offenses), offenses involving drug or gun sales or possession, or the growing number of internet fraud and theft crimes. Also, UCRs often fail to capture much of domestic violence, which still is not often reported to police. In spite of these shortcomings, the UCR Program has proven to be an indicator of trends, and the nationwide decreases tracked in UCRs over time does suggest a substantial and continuing downward trend in violent and property crime in the United States. Recent reports of spikes in gang-related crimes in select major cities, and the more recent data that reflect increased violent crime–victimization rates, do not deter from this much broader and more stable overarching downward trend. Notably, murder rates, the most valid and reliable measure of crime, continued a declining trend in 2011.

Smart Policing

The implications of the downward trends in crime for policing and all aspects of the criminal justice system are immense. First, law enforcement practitioners must gain a better understanding of the factors contributing to these downward trends so that the field can continue to adjust strategies and tactics in a way to sustain law enforcement. Smart Policing—which entails strategic police/stakeholder partnerships; data-driven strategies and tactics derived from analysis; and field research and technology applications—emphasizes science–based approaches in addressing crime. It also involves bringing together researchers and police practitioners to work collaboratively in using research to understand the drivers of crime trends and to guide police operations.

Smart Policing takes on greater importance in a resource-constrained environment. Policing agencies should be encouraged to use
enabling technologies that can serve as force multipliers and contain labor costs, while enhancing police performance. These technologies include expanded networks of video surveillance, license plate readers, and improved data-processing and data-sharing applications.

In a recent study by the Urban Institute, video surveillance applications proved to be an effective tool for reducing crime when effectively integrated into police operations. Use of a range of other technologies is credited with reducing crime in Detroit. Chris Melde, a criminal justice researcher at Michigan State University, believes that in-car computers and access to databases allow police officers to more quickly process arrests and save valuable time; and that improved information sharing—including digital photos that can be emailed and fingerprints that can be processed in minutes rather than days—contributed to improved efficiency and performance and ultimately to lower crime rates in Detroit.

Smart Policing also stresses the need for strategic relationships with various community stakeholders. Law enforcement personnel continue to learn (and sometimes re-learn) the importance of community partners in developing and implementing effective community-safety strategies. Partnerships contribute to police-citizen cooperation, including the flow of information about crimes and suspects; facilitate mutual respect among officers and the citizens they protect and serve; and can be a force multiplier that allows law enforcement to tap into valuable community resources in efforts to prevent and deter crime. A recent example of an effective partnership in attacking an emerging crime problem is the Reno, Nevada Police Department, which is working with pharmacists, physicians, and mental health professionals to curb the illegal use of prescription drugs.

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New Police Roles

Reduced crime volume will either: a) further justify the calls for fewer police resources, and/or b) justify the need for expansion of law enforcement roles, similar to what happened with fire fighters over the last 25 years. For example, police may find themselves playing increasing roles in monitoring parolees and probationers or in disaster and emergency response operations.

For many years, the criminal justice system was expanding with the rises in crime, leading to more police; more arrests; more court activity; and, ultimately, more prisoners, probationers, and parolees. Growth in criminal justice system costs began to contribute to expanding state and local deficits. Ending this spiral of growth gives the justice system an opportunity to recalibrate its requirements in the currently fiscally-constrained environment and to reexamine its mission and role in ensuring public safety.

A New Policing Paradigm

The stable and consistent trends in the retreat of serious crime levels provides America’s law enforcement community with a chance to engage a Smart Policing paradigm that emphasizes preventing crimes from occurring, thus reducing crime and limiting the input of persons into the criminal justice system. This trend analysis suggests some stabilization in lower crime rates that may provide opportunities to devote more manpower to proactive policing (instead of reactive policing), and to investigations that close cases and improve clearance rates. This paradigm shift—which stresses preventing the occurrence of crimes and increasing the likelihood of apprehension and conviction when a crime is committed—should ultimately reduce arrests and inflows into the criminal justice system, and it will reduce costs.

New Crime-Measurement Strategies

This paper focuses on measurement of crime. The data one captures and how one measures law enforcement performance is important. Measuring levels of crime and assessing police performance based on UCR data through Computer Statistics (COMSTAT) and other
programs has helped target police activity as a means to reduce crime.

Unfortunately, the UCR Program does not capture a wide range of crimes, and this lack of specificity in measurement can certainly affect how law enforcement agencies prioritize crime-reduction efforts, as they may focus only on those areas that they measure. For example, crimes involving internet fraud may not be a priority for enforcement efforts since their measurement is not part of how performance is evaluated.

In response, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been encouraging jurisdictions to use their more updated reporting system—the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which collects a range of data on each single crime occurrence. The NIBRS was officially approved for state and local use in 1988, but, because of costs and other impediments, most jurisdictions have failed to fully implement this data-collection system. Full implementation of NIBRS could provide more detailed, accurate, and meaningful data than traditional summary reporting and could contribute to a better understanding of crime trends.

Unfortunately, arrests are a focal point for measuring performance, often resulting in valuable resources being overly used to arrest low-end offenders. Emphasizing arrest as a basis for assessing officer performance may have minimal impact on crime and may drain limited resources. Some departments are now paying more attention to clearance rates as a measure of performance. Improved clearance rates may deactivate more offenders and ultimately enhance the effects of police deterrents. Other departments are focusing their measures on “preventable offenses” or on those on which timely police deployment and response can have a greater impact, such as street robberies, burglaries, and theft. Finally, some departments are increasingly including community surveys of police performance to provide feedback on overall perceptions of police services.25 As departments rely more on data-driven approaches, law enforcement

25 Boston PD has initiated an effort to improve homicide clearance rates and is linking them to performance. East Orange, New Jersey PD has developed and captures preventable offense measures.
practitioners will take more care with the quality of data provided and better understand how this data can be used to capture policing activities and measure performance.
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IV. Conclusion

In spite of the recent highly publicized mass shootings and the subsequent debate over guns, long-term declining crime trends remain as the most important development in the American crime picture. The declines, especially within the context of the last 20 years, have been broad in terms of types of crime and geography, and have been substantial in terms of volume and rates. The strongest evidence for this declining trend is the dramatic decrease (over 40 percent) in murders in the last 20 years.

Recently released preliminary crime data for 2012 suggest that the declining trend may be starting to flatten out. Resource constraints affecting police-manpower levels—and the economic stress experienced by many Americans—could ultimately reverse the declining trend. Continued progress in reducing crime may require smarter and more science-based policing, as well as increased efforts to address root causes.
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